

Appendix 2-D. AHRQ Linking Policy

Introduction

Hyperlinks allow users to move online from concept to concept in a nonlinear fashion. Internal links point to materials contained on a single Web server and within that Web site while external links point to materials that are resident on other Web servers and sites (or to applications that are maintained by outside entities).

This AHRQ policy is in addition to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) [Web Standards](#).

Requirements

Internal Links

Internal links do not create any liability issues because the materials are on the same server. However, these links serve as one method of navigation within a site and should serve to facilitate use of a Web site—not to confuse or disorient users so they become lost on the site.

As part of creating a navigation architecture that allows the user to maintain orientation, be consistent in the use of hypertext links in lists and the level of the target for these links to subcategories of information.

External Links

External links to other Web sites constitute an “implied endorsement” and create a business advantage for the linked sites. Therefore, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) requires Federal agencies to perform risk assessments of external links from their sites.

For AHRQ-funded resources, potential links to external sources need to be assessed against [HHS](#) and [AHRQ](#) linking policies and criteria. If a site can make a case for deviating from these policies, then the specific review and selection criteria must be justified and posted on the Web site for full disclosure.

Before establishing links to external sites, check on the linking policies of those sites. Even if the sites do not require permission to establish a link, you should notify Web sites of your intention to establish a link as a courtesy because your links will drive traffic to the sites and create demand on their servers.

Outside Web resources may link to Agency resources, providing the link is not displayed in a way that would imply the Agency’s endorsement of a specific commercial product or service. Each AHRQ-funded Web site should have a page that discusses the “Linking In” policy and provides a 25-word descriptor for the site with key words that other sites can use when establishing the link.

AHRQ Policies and Criteria

The Agency takes a conservative approach to external linking because AHRQ cannot appear to recommend sites that are incompatible with its scope and mission. Under its current policy, AHRQ links only to:

- Other HHS agencies
- Other Federal agencies
- Nonprofit organizations that are official partners on specific projects or conferences
- Noncommercial Web resources that are specifically referenced in AHRQ-generated Web documents

Links to commercial sites that market products or services are generally not appropriate, nor are links to sites that charge for information.

The Office of Communications (OC) reviews links for AHRQ Web-based resources maintained internally and housed on AHRQ resources for compliance with the Agency policy and selection criteria. For contractor-maintained servers, the contractor is responsible for assessing links and posting only those links that meet selection and evaluation criteria.

External links must be clearly delineated, and a brief description should be provided about the content of each linked resource.

AHRQ complies with the [HHS External Link Icon and Disclaimer standard](#).

Once links are established, they need to be reassessed periodically to ensure they are still valid and the linked resources continue to meet selection criteria.

These principles may not cover all possibilities and circumstances. Specific cases that present new issues must be evaluated on their merits in keeping with the goals and mission of AHRQ.

Additional Portal Links

The General Services Administration (GSA) requires that all federally funded sites in the Government domain provide a link to the GSA portal, [USA.gov](#), from the home page of the funded site. These sites are, in turn, indexed through the USA.gov portal.

AHRQ Web Site Selection and Review Criteria

The following summarizes the selection and review criteria for external links from the AHRQ Web site.

Selection Criteria

Active links to sites external to AHRQ Web resources can only be made to:

- HHS and other Government agency Web sites.
- Nonprofit organization Web resources that reflect the outputs of specific projects or conferences of AHRQ with official partners (specific URL, not home page).
- Noncommercial resources that are specifically referenced in AHRQ-generated Web documents (specific URL, not home page).

Review Criteria

- External links should only be established to sites or Web-based resources that are directly related to AHRQ's mission and outputs.
- External links must not conflict with official Agency, HHS, or other Federal policies or regulations.
- Links to external resources cannot imply endorsement of a specific commercial product or service (Title 44 USC).
- Linked resources must be in compliance with the Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1998 as amended and other accessibility guidelines as directed by the Department of Justice.
- Linked resources should not contain inappropriate or questionable materials that jeopardize the Agency through associated liability, potential embarrassment, or political ramifications.
- Content is accurate, scientifically sound, balanced, and current (pages show updates).
- Sources of all content are specifically identified, and references are provided for health and scientific claims.
- The sponsoring organization(s), aims, and sources of support are clearly identified.
- Biases or conflicts of interest from advocacy positions, marketing, or sources of financial support are explicitly acknowledged.
- Privacy and confidentiality matters are clearly addressed, and registration is not required.
- Contact information and feedback exist for both content and technical issues.
- The design, reading level, and navigation tools are appropriate for the intended audience and do not present barriers to users.